

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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It has occurred to me that the ancient mathematical formulae, so often intangibly applied, might well be the practical keys to human destiny.



I HAD been just about to leave when my buzzer sounded.

She was about five-foot-six, had raven black hair, and I had never seen her before.

Her eyes seemed to calculate my

apartment. "For \$225 a month, there must be more than meets the eye."

"I have a number of other rooms," I said, "and as far as I am concerned, you are not lost. You

have come to absolutely the right place."

"If your name is James Brannon, I have."

I took her wrap. "I'm sorry, but the apartment isn't for rent. If that's why you came up?"

"No. I'm here because Boy Scouts find the darndest things." She took a seat on a divan. "You may call me Madelaine."

"Madelaine," I said, "it is the last thought in my mind to insult you, but nevertheless in all fairness I think I ought to mention that there are some things I do not pay for. It is a principle of mine."

She smiled. "I don't go around knocking on strange doors for my living, James, if that's what you're thinking. As a matter of fact, I'm a school teacher. Mathematics."

"Really," I said. "I'm rather good with figures myself."

"So the superintendent told me. We accidentally got around to discussing that while I pretended to be pricing apartments."

"Madelaine," I said, "all this must have a beginning. Could you start there?"

She nodded. "That would be in April on an old back road. It is a shortcut and I use it whenever I feel that I might be late for school. You see I live with my parents in the country and I commute to the high school in Jefferson every

day, which takes some planning."

I went about fixing two drinks.

"It is a one-lane road, hardly ever used, and you can imagine how irritated I was to find another car blocking the way." She looked at me and smiled again. "I don't remember what model it was, but the car was large and expensive and empty. I blew my horn for perhaps ten minutes, but no one appeared. Finally I decided to take a chance and just managed to inch my car around it. I almost went into the ditch and it was the only time that semester I was late for school."

"Is Scotch all right?" I asked.

She nodded. "And now we come to this month of October and the Boy Scouts. It seems that Troop 181, Jefferson, was rooting about in the woods beside that particular road looking for arrow heads or mushrooms or whatever boys look for, when two of them noticed a depression in the ground. Their active imaginations told them it might be an Indian grave. And so the little ones dug, and what do you think they found?"

I gave her a glass. "A body, I'll bet."

"Exactly. Not Indian, of course. And through various gruesome means, the police identified it as that of Mrs. Irene Linton. She was last seen leaving her apartment in

this city on April 14. The police gave her husband a rather rough time, but eventually they decided he was innocent of her death. It does seem, though, that they suspect she had been having an affair. However, she kept it so secret that they have been unable to find out who the man was."

Madelaine sipped her drink. "I took the trouble to check back in my school records, and I discovered that I'd been late on April 15th, the day after Mrs. Linton was last seen. Having established that, I drove to the License Bureau, fluttered my eyes at a tall male clerk, and got the confidential information that license number P 31 416 belongs to one James Brannon."

I walked over to the fireplace. "And now you're going to tell me that the very big and very expensive car blocking the road on the morning of April 15th was mine? You have a remarkable memory, Madelaine. You see a license number in April and it remains with you until October? Or did you write it down for some reason at the time?"

"No. But as I said, I happen to be a mathematics teacher and the license number struck a note and remained in my memory. If you will recall your elementary arithmetic, you must remember that pi

equals 3.146," she said smugly.

"Madelaine," I said, "I have the strange feeling that you don't intend to go to the police with your information."

"Not unless I have to. I suppose you're bright enough to figure out what I mean by that?"

I took a poker out of the stand. "I've never been blackmailed before. But then I suppose there's a first time for everything."

Her eyes became wary. "This is apparently the ideal moment to remind you that I've taken the usual precautions. I've put all this into a letter, and if I should happen to depart this earth violently, or just disappear, it will naturally be forwarded to the police."

I examined the poker critically. "Washed this thoroughly after I whacked Mrs. Linton. Had to get a new rug too."

She was curious. "Why did you kill her?"

"Just one of those things. Could happen to anybody. Women have a tendency to magnify what men would regard as basically casual." I sighed. "I don't often lose my temper to that extent, but I did have a headache and a screeching woman on my hands did not help to improve the situation."

I studied Madelaine. "You are a naughty blackmailer and I ought to call the police. But I will resist

that temptation because I am magnanimous, generous, and forgiving to a fault. I don't want to see you go to prison."

"How charming. But somehow I doubt your motive."

"Madelaine," I said, "you quite properly remembered the numerals on the license plate, but you should have paid a little more

She didn't understand what I was driving at.

"Let me put it this way," I said. "In April you saw an automobile with the license number P 31 416. In other words, your murderer's license plates were due to expire in August of this year. They did. And he got another set of plates and another number. And since mine ex-



attention to the prefix letter P."

"Really? Why?"

"In this state," I said, "the prefix letters A and B are reserved for the month of January. They indicate that the license was issued in that month and expires in the same month the next year. C and D are reserved for February. E and F for March. And so on until we come to the letter P, which is reserved for August."

pired in August too, I happened to be in line when the Bureau issued P 31 416."

I finished my drink. "When you fluttered your eyes at that tall clerk, Madelaine, you should have asked who had license number P 31 416 in *April*, not who happens to have it *now*."

It took her a few moments to accept that. "It wasn't your car? You didn't murder Mrs. Linton?"

"Of course not."

Her eyes became thoughtful.

"Madelaine," I said, "I suppose now you're going back to the License Bureau and make your questions more specific? But perhaps your murderer is really a poor man. What profit is there in that?"

"You forget the very big and very expensive car."

"You have a definite point to keep you interested, Madelaine. However, the License Bureau is undoubtedly closed for the night and it's probably raining outside or something. There's no need to run away."

I made two more drinks and brought her a glass.

She regarded me. "It's a pity. I expected a rather profitable evening. You are the Brannon of Brannon Bakeries, aren't you?"

"The very same." I sat down beside her. "Before you approach your murderer, Madelaine, would you do me one slight favor? Would you alter your letter to include his name instead of mine?"

"Oh, that," she said. "There's no letter. I'm practical enough to know I can't enjoy revenge from the grave."

I raised my glass in a silent toast to P 31 416.

It was a small conceit begun by my father and the License Bureau has been most cooperative. We have had the same number reserved for our family for fifteen years. The Brannon Bakeries were founded on the production of pie.

My eyes went to the poker.

No, not now, I thought. Later.

I moved closer to Madelaine and smiled.



Dear Fans:

Here are the particulars about the Alfred Hitchcock Fan Club:

Membership dues are one dollar which covers mailing costs and handling. (Please send coins or money orders, no stamps.) For this you will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news, which will be issued four times a year. You can't imagine how rewarding it is to hear from so many loyal readers, and active, and incoming Fan Club members. I want to thank all of you for your enthusiastic interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

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